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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 000456

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AF FOR A/S FRAZER AND DAS SWAN

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA/ERITREA: MANAGING TENSIONS, PROMOTING
DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS

REF: ADDIS 418

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S/NF) Summary: Ethiopian forces remain in defensive positions despite increased Eritrean incursions in the TSZ, an offensive deployment of Eritrean tanks in the TSZ near Bure and Eritrean attacks on border posts which have resulted in some Ethiopian civilian casualties. Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG), Ambassador Azouz Ennifar, presented a pessimistic view of the situation along the border to the diplomatic corps in Addis on February 8 (Reftel), noting Eritrea's clear intention to move into most of the TSZ. Despite Prime Minister Meles' stress on a defensive posture, there is growing fear among diplomats and the Ethiopian military that Eritrea is pushing its military posture along the border beyond common sense and could potentially trigger another round of fighting. Norway's former special advisor and currently Ambassador to Ethiopia, Jens Petter Kjemprud, recently returned from Asmara. He noted that there is an outside hope to renew dialogue with President Isaias, pointing to a possible change of heart by Eritrea based on its failed efforts in Somalia in supporting extremist elements. While Meles' clear focus is on stabilizing Somalia and he does not want another war with Eritrea, GOE officials view Eritrea as pushing to a possible direct conflict. End summary.

Deteriorating Situation Along the Border

¶2. (S/NF) SRSG Ambassador Ennifar told Ambassador during several private meetings of his deep concern about increased Eritrean incursions into the TSZ. These signal a clear intention by Eritrea to control the TSZ and eliminate the TSZ as a buffer with Ethiopia, he said. Eritrea's defiance of UNSC 1640 in restricting UN operations has made it extremely difficult for UNMEE to monitor most of the border and specifically violations made by Eritrean forces. Despite Eritrea's restrictions, Ennifar noted that in a brief period UNMEE noted 17 violations of the TSZ, mostly by Eritrean forces. If Eritrea lifted restrictions on UNMEE flight operations, UNMEE would be able to verify the extent and impact of Eritrea's incursions into the TSZ as well as Ethiopian responses. Overall, Ennifar noted that it was relatively easier to monitor Ethiopian troop movement.

¶3. (S/NF) Also of concern to Ennifar was the placement of a

dozen Eritrean tanks and 1,700 Eritrean troops in the TSZ near Bure, as well as the presence of Ethiopian tanks on Ethiopia's side of the border in the same area. There are also increased Eritrean activities along the border which have resulted in Ethiopian civilian casualties. Prime Minister Meles has downplayed Eritrea's activities in private talks with the Ambassador, noting that Ethiopia will maintain its defensive posture and keep Isaias "in a box." But in a separate conversation with Chief of Staff Samora, activities by Eritrea appeared to be a growing concern to the Ethiopian military, especially Ethiopian civilian casualties at the hands of Eritrean forces along the border. Diplomats here have raised concerns that Eritrea is pushing its incursions into the TSZ beyond reason and could trigger renewed conflict.

Isaias Open to New Diplomatic Efforts?

14. (S/NF) Norway's Ambassador to Ethiopia and former special envoy for the Horn of Africa, Jens Petter Kjemprud, who recently returned from a visit to Asmara, told the Ambassador that there is an outside chance that Isaias may be receptive to some type of diplomatic efforts to resolve tensions with Ethiopia. The Norwegian Ambassador opined that based on his discussions with Yemane Ghebreab, Eritrea was shaken by its failed Somalia policy. Eritrea's deployment of advisors to support extremist elements fighting Ethiopia and the TFG has undercut its diplomatic standing; Eritrea may now be looking for a way to enhance its image, Kjemprud suggested. Ambassador Kjemprud said Yemane will be in Norway soon and the GON will attempt to engage Yemane to determine

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how far Norway can go in pushing for some type of dialogue with Eritrea, leading to possible peace talks or normalization discussions between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

15. (S/NF) Ambassador Yamamoto encouraged Norway to continue its efforts, but to also keep Washington informed. Ambassador cautioned that Norway should not count on the U.S. to become involved at this point, given President Isaias, restrictions on U.S. activities in Eritrea and strong criticism of the U.S. The Norwegian Ambassador also noted that other countries like Japan and the Netherlands could be helpful, given their neutrality and support for a peace process.

Comment: Ethiopia Still Not Spoiling to Fight

16. (S/NF) Norway's efforts to ease border tensions will be a long shot at best. For the present, Somalia and internal stability are Prime Minister Meles, top concerns. He is looking at the Eritrean border as a diversion from the more pressing strategic interests of stabilizing Somalia and resolving internal political issues. Until Somalia is settled, Meles is taking a defensive posture and keeping his forces in line and not reacting to Eritrean incursions into the TSZ or Ethiopian civilian casualties due to Eritrean attacks. Ethiopian officials we have met feel that despite Isaias, failures in Somalia to weaken Ethiopia through a proxy war, Isaias may still try to push beyond common sense in other efforts to undercut Ethiopia, and his actions could eventually lead to direct conflict.

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